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ABSTRACT

People who have reached a career plateau may have become demotivated. The career plateau often coincides with the so-called midlife crisis. The midlife and midcareer crisis is a time of reassessment, self-evaluation, and reflection; awareness of aging and of the limitations of the future produces such problems as depression, discouragement and lost motivation, affecting marriage, health, and career. Four major response patterns during a midcareer crisis are the constructive, underachieving, defensive, and depressed styles. Managers dealing with staff undergoing midcareer crisis can help people change their dysfunctional responses and adjust to their altered environment. There are five basic tasks with which managers can help individuals: (1) developing awareness of career anchors; (2) assessing the implications for the future of those anchors; (3) choosing to accept the present or work toward change; (4) working out new roles and new family/work relationships; and (5) working out mentoring relationships. Matching organizational and individual needs through such strategies as job redesign, counseling, retraining, retirement, and reward systems enables the organization and its personnel to weather the midcareer crisis. (SK)

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THE MID-CAREER PLATEAU: A NOTE ON COPING WITH DEMOTIVATED STAFF

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January, 1982

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THE MID-CAREER PLATEAU: A NOTE ON COPING WITH DEMOTIVATED STAFF

Introduction

1. This Paper is designed to help those who have to cope with staff who have reached a "career plateau" and who, as a result, may have become demotivated. In I.B.N. 1602, "Motivation and Career", (which this Paper is also intended to supplement), it was suggested that the first fundamental step in relating the two concepts was to re-assess them, and that the life, social, and career cycles described by Schein (1980), through which all human beings pass, offer one approach in that if people are aware of the major issues with which they are faced at each stage and attempt to grapple with specific tasks which resolve such crises, the rite of passage from one to another is made easier.

2. The career plateau coincides for most people with the so-called "mid-life crisis" (Jacques /1965/). This Paper therefore attempts to offer some explanations of organisational and personal behaviour during the crisis and to outline ways in which managers can assist their staff (and themselves) to re-appraise realistically existing roles and responses to a levelling-off in the career climb. The References and Selected Bibliography identify key literature dealing with the problem.

The Mid-Life Crisis

3. The experience of the mid-life and mid-career crisis is a universal one: it is a time of reassessment, of coming to terms with the past and the future. It is characterised by a growing introspection, self-evaluation and reflection, largely an existential questioning of self-values and of life itself. Awareness of physical and mental ageing, of a limited future, conspire to produce problems of attitudes and behaviour. Schein identifies three major problems. First, those resulting from depression, discouragement and of lost motivation. Second, a loss of interest in work and a feeling of being trapped in a career with little or no prospects. Finally, family and interpersonal problems which create new or increasing demands.

4. The literature on the life and career cycle generally reports similar experiences and suggests a number of theories, or models, to explain and describe the phenomenon. Bühler (1935) sees life as an expansion - plateau - contraction process, with mid-life a point on the plateau which is characterised by examination of the past and the future path to achieving life goals. Erikson (1973) describes an eight stage model, the last three of which comprise adulthood. The mid-life point juxtaposes cruelly the two stages of "generativity" (the creative, productive parts of life) with "stagnation" which leads to a crisis about the meaningfulness of life. Levinson (1978) views the mid-life crisis as starting in the mid-forties (a decade later than Jacques /1965/) when people move from an "apprentice" role to an "expert" role during which shift three major tasks have to be undertaken: re-appraising the past, modifying one's life structure, and "individuation" (i.e. establishing definite boundaries between the self and the outside world). Super (1957), looking more specifically at career, sees career development and the individual's response to it, in terms of the quality of the relationship which exists between the individual's self-concept, or self-esteem, and the realities of work and its environment. The process of the "establishing" stage of mid-career if that of modifying self-concept, which/

which depends on how well the individual can adapt to the opportunities and requirements of work. Some are able to adapt more effectively than others; most people need help. The common theme of these theories is that this process of change, or passage, is tumultuous, disruptive and depressing, but is followed by the stabilisation of middle age.

5. Three main problem areas are associated with the crisis; those connected with marriage, health and careers. As far as careers are concerned responses are likely to be feelings of being burned-out, trapped, bored and frustrated, accompanied by, in some degree, a growing professional obsolescence. Some people adjust badly, developing, for example, stress symptoms as a coping style. Kret de Vries (1980) identifies four major response patterns by managers during the mid-career crisis. Two dimensions, or polarities, can be discerned, representing the manager's orientation towards the external world. One, is the activity-passivity polarity indicating the sense of dynamism with which the individual relates to the outside world. The second, represents the degree of reality with which the individual interprets and perceives his environment. The polarity is between a "real" orientation and a "distorted" orientation. Combining these two dimensions produces four major styles with which managers interact with their environment:

(a) Constructive

(b) Underachieving

(c) Defensive

(d) Depressed

This is represented in Figure 1:

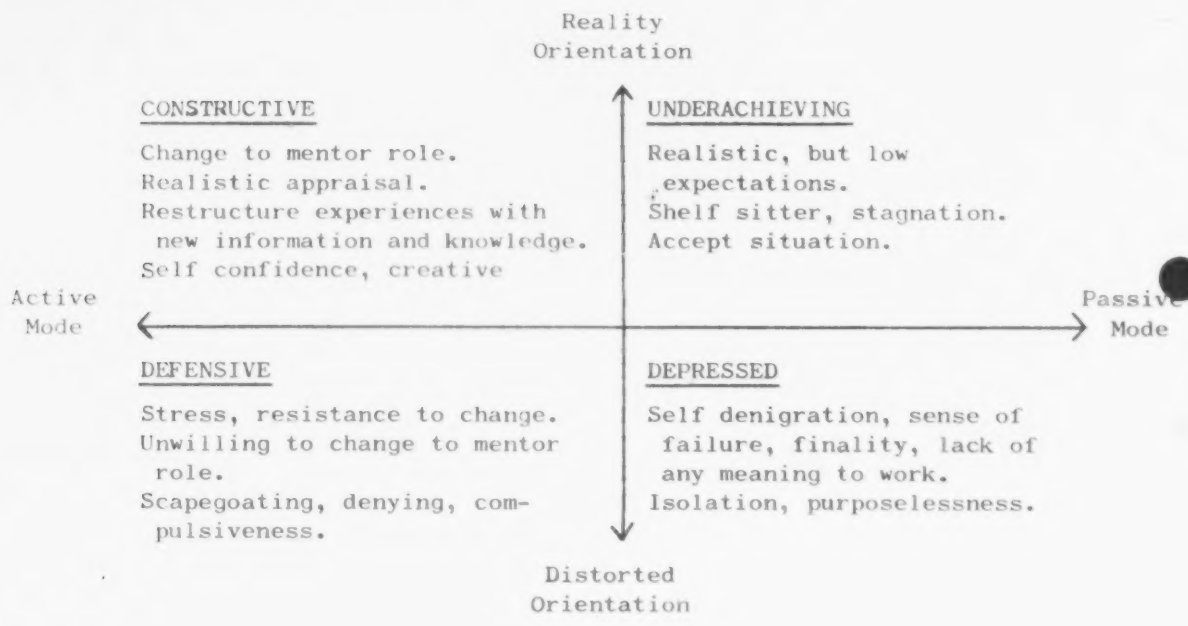

Figure 1

6. Obviously, people need to be helped to shift from organisational dysfunctional modes of response, i.e. to shift as near as possible to the constructive mode of response. The need for such a switch is particularly great with staff who are marginal performers. Following from the problems of defining marginal, or unsatisfactory performance in the job, five possible courses of action are open. Transfer, demoting, promoting and disciplining (generally seen as the choice between "fire" and "dishire"), sidestep the main issue. The fifth, "salvage" raises the issue of who is to be salvaged, and who fired or dishired.

Shouksmith (1968) identifies eight factors to be considered in making the decision on whether or not to salvage:

(a) Length of service: if lengthy, managerial inertia may be to blame.

(b) Performance record: a gradual slow-down presents the major problems since this may not have been effectively monitored. A sudden drop, on the other hand, may be the result of a problem which can be identified and a solution found.

(c) Skills: people with vital skills of which there is a shortage are more worthy of salvaging than those without.

(d) Absence record: continuously high absence record is indicative of a different problem area from a sudden drop-off.

(e) Legal situation: if they can be fired, or if they cannot, presents two different problems.

(f) Investment: what are the costs of the possible options? What would be the best investment?

(g) Management: of what quality has the supervision been? Have training needs been identified?

If the decision to salvage has been made as a result of considering these factors, the next problem is how best to implement that salvage.

7. Two broad approaches are possible to salvaging. First, the model offered by Schein (1980) in the process of matching organisational and individual needs, and secondly, the intervention model of Maier (1958) which distinguishes guidance, counselling and psychotherapy as an intervention continuum for dealing with people spread between the two polarities of "Normal" and "Psychotic".

Matching Organisational and Individual Needs

8. The mid-career crisis has four general issues which have to be confronted. They are:-

(a) A major reassessment of progress relative to ambitions thus forcing decisions to level off, change careers, or forge ahead to new and higher challenges.

(b)/

(b) Assessing career ambitions against the more general aspects of mid-life transition, for example, appraising dreams and hopes versus realities.

(c) Deciding how important work and career are to be in total life.

(d) Meeting needs to become mentors to others.

These general issues can only be met by carrying out certain specific tasks. It is in helping people with these tasks that managers have the best hope of generally coping with staff in mid-career crisis and with restoring motivation and meaningfulness to those people. There are five basic tasks:-

(a) The individual must become aware of his "career anchor", his talents, motives and values.

(b) Assess realistically the implications for the future of that anchor.

(c) Chossing to accept the present or to work for whatever future is visualised.

(d) Work out new roles and relationships with family (and others) around the specific choice made.

(e) Work out mentoring relationships with others. (The next part of the career cycle can be either in a leadership role, or in a non-leadership role, followed by decline and disengagement.)

The ultimate aim of these tasks is to achieve a proper balance of involvement in work, family and self-development, and also to maintain an orientation towards a positive growth. If people understand the underlying dynamics which cause these problems they are moving towards a high reality orientation and an active mode of response.

Intervention

9. The work of Maier (1958) suggests an approach to helping people come to terms with reality. His intervention model is the process of helping someone, in the widest sense, for what are really therapeutic purposes. Most staff problems resulting from mid-career crisis are behavioural, i.e. how well people adjust to and cope with their physical and mental environment in which they live. Two polarities of behaviour can be observed. (Figure 2)

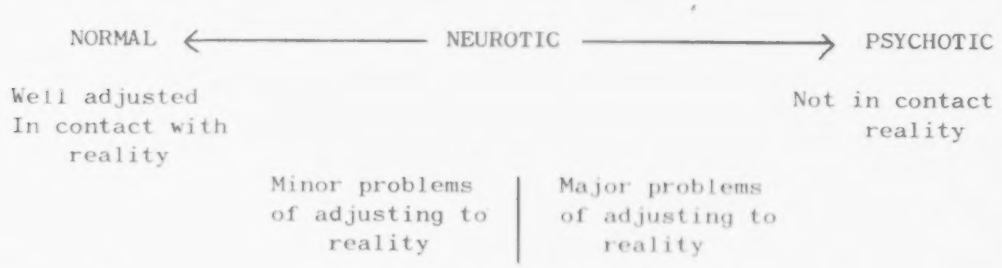

Figure 2

The/

The processes of guidance, counselling, and psychotherapy can be overlaid onto this continuum. (Figure 3)

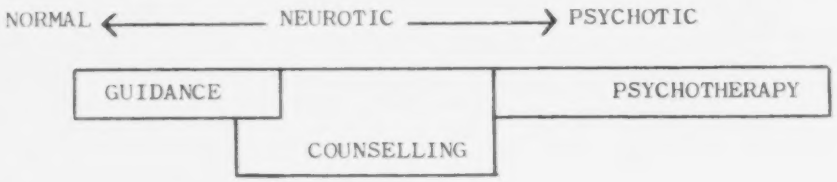

Figure 3

Guidance is the process of collecting information which the individual needs in order to solve his problems. This is then analysed, opening up possible courses of action from which the most effective can be rationally selected.

Counselling is rather more problem-solving centred. An individual works with a counsellor who plays a supportive role, setting up learning situations so that he can obtain new insights, perceptions, perspectives, and can as a result change his behaviour to a more satisfactory and satisfying mode. The process, largely reflective and only secondarily interpretive, is a clarifying process leading to attitude and behaviour change.

Psychotherapy, on the other hand, is entirely analytical and interpretive and operates in the individual's sub-conscious levels of existence. Maier sees guidance and counselling as perfectly viable and desirable alternatives to the standard assessment and appraisal interviews carried out in most organisations.

10. Putting these two models together offers a strategy and tactics for coping with the devitalised members of staff who are so as the result of either a career plateau or the mid-life crisis. Figure 4 presents Schein's overview of the whole career cycle and how organisational and individual needs can be matched. The human resource planning and development model presents a programme for which managers have a responsibility.

11. It should be emphasised that such coping programmes require specific sets of skills, most notably those centred on the skills of guidance and counselling. These skills are dealt with in separate Papers (1).

Figure 4 - over

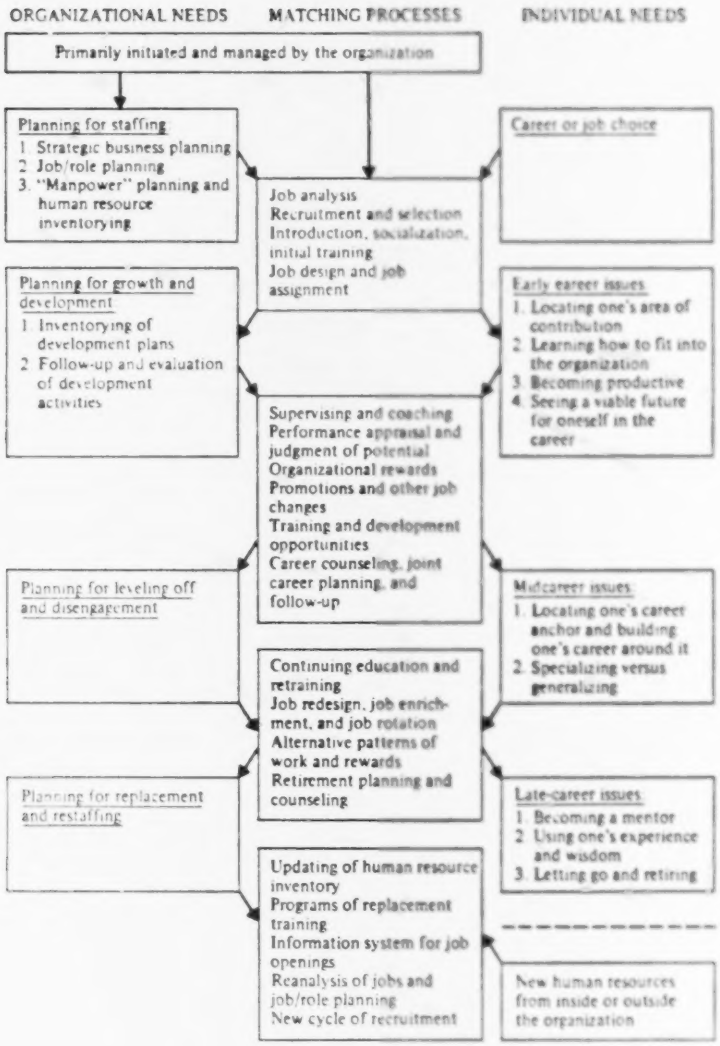
ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS
MATCHING PROCESSES
INDIVIDUAL NEEDS
Primarily initiated and managed by the organization
Planning for staffing
1. Strategic business planning
2. Job/role planning
3. "Manpower" planning and human resource inventorying
Career or job choice
Job analysis
Recruitment and selection
Introduction, socialization, initial training
Job design and job assignment
Planning for growth and development
1. Inventorying of development plans
2. Follow-up and evaluation of development activities
Early career issues
1. Locating one's area of contribution
2. Learning how to fit into the organization
3. Becoming productive
4. Seeing a viable future for oneself in the career
Supervising and coaching
Performance appraisal and judgment of potential
Organizational rewards
Promotions and other job changes
Training and development opportunities
Career counseling, joint career planning, and follow-up
Planning for leveling off and disengagement
Midcareer issues
1. Locating one's career anchor and building one's career around it
2. Specializing versus generalizing
Continuing education and retraining
Job redesign, job enrichment, and job rotation
Alternative patterns of work and rewards
Retirement planning and counseling
Planning for replacement and restaffing
Late-career issues
1. Becoming a mentor
2. Using one's experience and wisdom
3. Letting go and retiring
Updating of human resource inventory
Programs of replacement training
Information system for job openings
Reanalysis of jobs and job/role planning
New cycle of recruitment
New human resources from inside or outside the organization

Figure 4

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FOOTNOTE

(1) See, for example, Turner, C.M. (1978) Inter-Personal Skills in Further Education, Coombe Lodge Publications, and Marsh, D.T. (1980) Effective Listening Skills, Coombe Lodge Information Bank Paper IBN 1463 and Marsh, D.T. (1979) Conflict Resolution, Coombe Lodge Information Bank Paper IBN 1571.

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